

# College Admissions Essays



## FOLLOW THIS “RECIPE” FOR A SUCCESSFUL ESSAY PLAN, DESCRIBE, REVIEW, REVISE

Nearly every college expects at least one personal essay as part of the admissions process. Writing an admissions essay can be a challenge. But this “recipe” will help with simple steps.

### FIRST...WHAT DO COLLEGES WANT?

Colleges use three general types of questions. Let's explore each one.

#### QUESTION TYPE 1. WHO ARE YOU?

Colleges may ask you to tell a story from your life or to write about something that demonstrates your character. They may ask you to describe your family's history or your dreams for the future.

The key to answer this type of question is to focus on a few examples that describe you well. Don't try to tell everything about yourself. Instead, pick one or two examples and then write your essay on just those points. Don't exaggerate. But do show off your interests and personality.

#### QUESTION TYPE 2. WHY US?

Colleges may want to know why you have chosen to apply or why you are interested in a certain career or a major. The college wants to know how committed you are to their school.

To answer, start with your goals. What do you dream of doing? Why do you have this dream? Then tie your goals to the college and the major. HINT: Do your homework! Don't write an essay about your interest in marine biology for a college that does not offer marine biology!

#### QUESTION TYPE 3. HOW DO YOU THINK?

Colleges often ask your opinion about a famous person or something in the news. Colleges want to find out how aware you are and to see how creatively and originally you can respond.

To answer this type of question, start with a little research. If you are writing about a global challenge, what do experts say about it? If you are describing a famous novelist, what books did he write? Once you know the facts, though, let your own opinions shine through. Don't just quote other people. Instead, share your ideas and your opinions.

## SECOND... HOW CAN YOU START AN ESSAY?

Now that you know more about what colleges might ask, let's start a draft essay with three steps.

### STEP 1: PLAN YOUR APPROACH BY THINKING ABOUT YOURSELF

What are your strengths and weaknesses? What are your best qualities?

Are you a hard worker? A fast learner? Are you curious? Determined? Passionate? Athletic?

Make a list of words that a friend or family member might use to describe you. Which of those words seem to describe the "real" you? Circle those words. They'll help you get started.

### STEP 2: DESCRIBE YOURSELF BY TELLING A STORY

Look at the words you circled. Do they describe you or could they describe many people? For instance, if you say you are athletic, what exactly does that mean? How can you describe yourself more specifically, and how can you highlight your positive qualities in that description?

Take a few minutes to add details to your list of words. Maybe you're not just "athletic," but rather a "dedicated athlete, who has overcome injury." Maybe you're not just "determined," but rather the "determined founder of Students for the Environment."

Think of as many examples as you can. Don't just list things you've done, but rather list the qualities that led you to do these things. A college will already know from your application if you are a varsity athlete or the president of a student group. What they won't know is what it is about you that made you that way. So think about how you can tell a story about yourself.

### STEP 3: REVIEW AND REVISE

Take what you've written so far and organize it. Then, using this outline, write as fast as you can for 15 or 20 minutes. Don't worry about mistakes or paragraphs or organization. Just focus on telling your story. If your success as an athlete in high school is due to the training you did to recover from an injury, write about that – about what happened, and what you did. If you decided to start a student group to solve a challenge in your community or at your school, write about the moment that challenge first seemed like something you could solve, and write about what you did. Set your work aside for a day or two. Then reread and revise.

### YOU'VE GOT A DRAFT!

After a few more days, look at your essay again. It may still need more work. But it is a good start. With a little more work, you will be able to submit this essay.

This handout is based on information found on [www.collegeboard.org](http://www.collegeboard.org).

**Sample College Essay #1 submitted for Admission to a University  
written by a student born in another country  
This student was admitted to University of Washington**

**University of Washington Question:** “Discuss how your family’s experience or cultural history enriched your or presented you with opportunities or challenges in pursuing your educational goals.”

For generations my family has devoted their lives to actual survival and finding contentment. As Armenians, we have struggled through genocide and economical devastation. My family’s lives were focused on their livelihood as human beings. Survival was their first priority and thus education was not really an issue. For my grandparents, it was not even possible to attend school in any form. When my family chose to come to the US, they gave my brother and me the most amazing gift, the opportunity to gain a real education. I was given the chance to not have to struggle with attaining the best education possible. The struggles my family faced helped me realize that education is a true privilege. My family’s lack of education helps me focus more on getting the most out of my education and therefore being the first in my family to go to college.

As Armenians, my family has struggled a great deal to get us where we are today. My great grandparents lived through the Armenian Genocide by hiding in caves. After the Genocide, all four of my grandparents were born in Turkey, in small remote villages. They struggled to constantly work on their family farms to put food on the table. Education was not even an option in their small villages. None of my grandparents had the opportunity to go to school or even to learn how to read or write.

My parents were born in the same setting as my grandparents. Later on, their families were fortunate enough to move to the city. They moved to Istanbul, Turkey. My parents had the opportunity to begin school, but moving to the city presented a new struggle, that of finding jobs sufficient to support their family. This was of utmost importance in their survival. School was deemed less important and therefore my mother chose to stop attending school after the fifth grade in order to help support her family. She got a full time job at a sewing factory at the age of 12. My father was fortunate enough to be able to go to school and hold down a job at the same time, but he did not graduate from high school. Another reason my parents did not get an education is because their parents did not instill the value of education in them. At the time my grandparents did not realize how much of an impact education could have on their families.

Their struggles became even greater when they decided to move to Armenia. Both my mother’s and my father’s family realized it was a mistake to move to Armenia when they got there. It was apparent that Armenia’s economy had not recovered from the 1915 Genocide. Everyone had to work for the family to survive. Furthering their education was not even an issue. It was at this point my parents got married. They realized that life was going to be difficult in Armenia, no matter what, so they decided they would move to America.

I was six months old when my family got our Visas to travel to America. We made the long journey from Armenia to Glendale, California, in September of 1990.

My parents, my father’s parents, my uncle, my three-year-old brother and I, at six months old, began our new lives in America together. This is where my family truly realized the value of education. They witnessed how education could define the way you live in America.

I am thankful for the opportunity to grow and achieve through education. My parents taught me that education is a privilege; that it shouldn’t be taken for granted. Early on I came to the realization that I must take advantage of all the educational opportunities that the rest of my family never had. The support and

admiration I get from my family has helped me set high educational goals for myself. I will graduate from high school in the top 5 percent of my class and go on to an academically prestigious University; my family gives complete support for my educational goals and aspirations. The first thing my grandparents ask when I see them is what I am learning in school and if I am keeping my grades up. They are proud to have such educated grandchildren. Seeing my grandparents struggle and feeling powerless because of their lack of education, makes me want to work even harder towards my educational goals. I want to show my family that our culture, as Armenians, does not just represent only the struggle to survive. Rather, we also represent the will to learn and the power that education has in determining our future.

**Sample College Essay #2 submitted for Admission to a University**  
**Written by a Student with economic challenges**  
**This Student was admitted to University of Washington & Emory University**

**University of Washington Question:** “Tell us a story from your life, describing an experience that either demonstrates your character or helped to shape it”

I turn up the dial on the portable heater and pull down the curtain separating the living room from the hallway in hopes that the always-frigid temperature of the room will rise. The trailer we live in is so decrepit that if we turn on the heat, the bill will be close to three hundred dollars for the month, which is one third of our monthly income. The conditions of living in a condemned trailer tend to be less than appealing, to say the least; we have mold that is visible on the ceilings, holes in the walls where the icy air comes through at night, and when it rains the water comes in and soaks the floor two feet into the doorways. However, we haven't always lived in such harsh conditions.

It was at the age of eight that my life was torn apart and I was first introduced to the horrific power of addiction. Drugs worked as a virus that took over my father and turned him into a different man. One day he put my mother and me on a Greyhound bus and calmly waved goodbye as we were no longer what he “needed” in life. Not only did I leave behind a very large part of my heart that day, but I also said goodbye to the comfortable lifestyle that I had grown up in. With my father no longer there to support us, my mom and I were introduced to the ways of government assistance; we were no longer people, just a case file number. Life became very hard as my mom struggled to get us through each month. On welfare, we only pulled in per month what most households make in about two weeks. The government didn't take into account that people needed luxuries such as heat and electricity.

The transition of moving across the country from everything I knew and loved was very hard on me. I withdrew from the world and I was no longer able to connect with anyone. My mom was the only comfort I had; I knew that everything she did was for me so that I could have a better life.

Then in the summer after sixth grade, I returned to Alabama to visit my family. Once I arrived, it was like things had never changed. I was seeing my family and I was happy again. The summer didn't last nearly long enough as time sped by at warp speed. The night before I was due back in Washington with my mom, I realized that I did not want to leave. Looking back on this now, I realize that my father was very irresponsible and wrong for saying that I could stay. However, hearing it that night, I was the happiest girl in the world because it meant that he was finally ready to fight for me again. The situation quickly escalated when I did not get off the plane as scheduled and my mom soon got a lawyer and the custody battle was on. After a few months, I saw less and less of my father. While he continued to fight for me in the courts, he began to frequently leave me at my aunt's house for weeks at a time and rarely came to visit. What I found most frustrating during this time was how he could act like everything was perfect on those few occasions he would come by to see me.

I had always been mature for my age and by this time doubts were beginning to creep in as I really thought about what my life would be like if I lived there, what it would be like without the one person I knew cared for me most and who I cared for in return. That is why when the day finally came for me to tell the judge whom I wanted to live with, I did what was best for me and I broke my father's heart.

When I returned to Washington, I was secretly filled with shame due to my very childish actions. However, I have come to realize that that experience led to the most critical decision of my life. I decided that I wanted more than my father could have ever given me. His life was filled with drugs, fines, court dates, and it was an altogether bad environment. I wanted a better life; I still do. For now I might live in a condemned

trailer, but I won't forever. I don't want to have to worry about whether or not bills will get paid. My exposure to that life without the security net of my mother lit a spark in my soul that will never be put out. I will make life better for the two of us.

**Sample College Essay #3 submitted for Admission to a University**  
**written by a student from a middle class family**  
**This student was admitted to University of Washington**

**University of Washington Question:** “Tell us a story from your life, describing an experience that either demonstrates your character or helped to shape it”

The definition of yoga is yoking together of the mind, body, and spirit. This is what was written on the board the first day of Beginning Yoga at Clark College. At the time, I didn't understand or even bother think about the significance of this statement. It took weeks before I could fully realize the meaning of this and many other life changing ideas presented in the class. Being involved in yoga helped me shape my character and become who I am today. I developed my compassion, awareness, and interest in global problems. I also learned how to live in the moment and appreciate every day.

Coming into the class I had many misconceptions about the concept and purpose of yoga. I thought all you had to do was stretch and relax. It seemed so simple, but I couldn't have been more wrong. The poses are merely the vehicle on the journey to becoming aware of yourself and the world around you. The process of connecting the mind, body, and soul through meditating and developing my focus has truly benefited the way I live. I can accept and understand new and different ideas much easier than before. Increasing and strengthening my meta-position has been an essential part of becoming who I am.

My experience in the class made me think about things that I never would have considered otherwise. One of my favorite parts of the class was when we discussed compassion. I never realized how much more I could be doing to make a change. Each quarter there is a different fundraising project organized by the teacher. All of the students are encouraged to contribute and donate. We raised \$200 for an organization that provides medicine and support for children suffering from AIDS in Africa. I now have a newly found passion for gaining knowledge about our world and what I can do to help. It's made a huge impact on me and has inspired me to become more interested and involved in making a difference. I'm doing my senior project on the benefits of organic food on the environment and body. I've been working in the gardens at my school and learning about the damaging effects of conventional growing methods. I'm also a part of the environmental club where we recently started a recycling program at our school. Another club I have become active in is the genocide awareness group called STAND. It's still a work in progress, but in the future we hope to have a variety of fundraisers to raise money and awareness for the genocide in Sudan.

I have also loved learning about all of the physical aspects in yoga. I discovered new edges and I have learned a lot about my body and its limits. I feel much more aware of my place in the field and I have really benefited from the challenge of trying new things. I have enjoyed being able to improve my balance, flexibility, and all around physical strength. While I have been enrolled in the class I've lost at least 10 pounds. It's a great feeling.

It may be hard to believe that a simple yoga class can have such a drastic effect on someone, but I honestly believe it has changed me, and the way I live my life. My focus, awareness, understanding, strength, compassion, and interest in world problems have all been enhanced from being in this class. I feel like I finally understand how to yoke together my mind, body, and spirit. I was terrified to take a college course but I'm so glad I had the courage to try something new.